

AUTUMN 1999

ISSUE 45



Community
Links

Museum
on the Move
ASW Reports

SHOCKNEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

03 BULLETIN BOARD**06 ASW REPORTS**

Reviews of this year's Annual Study Weekend in Northern Ireland

11 THEORY AND PRACTICE

Museum on the Move

The inside story of a new mobile museum service

An AMAzing Experience!

The new look AMA

15 MUSEUM FOCUS

Involving and Reaching Communities

'Common Ground: Portraits of Tower Hamlets' at the Ragged School Museum

18 SHCG COMMITTEE 1999-2000

Creating Community Links...

Museums are constantly searching for new ways of encouraging the local community to use their services. This will not happen if those communities do not feel that what the museum has to offer is relevant to them or if the museum itself appears to be inaccessible.

This issue of SHCG News focuses on how museums have involved the local community in a variety of ways. In Shropshire, Hereford and Worcester, the museum services have developed an innovative project to take the museum itself out to the community, whilst at the Ragged School Museum in London, staff have encouraged locals to bring their interpretation of the history around them into the museum.

Meanwhile, at this year's Annual Study Weekend, delegates debated whether or not museums could play a role through their collections and services in helping to heal the wounds of local communities. As the three reviewers observe, it is not easy to answer whether museums can or should heal. However, if museums continue to develop new ways of enabling local communities to access their histories and contribute to the way in which they are portrayed, museums will at least be relevant and worthwhile.

NICOLA BLEASBY - EDITOR

Postscript...

The months since the last issue of the News have been a busy time for your editor - I have moved house, moved jobs and got married! To ensure that I continue to receive material for the News, please update your mailing list and direct enquiries and articles to my new address at the British Red Cross Museum and Archives.

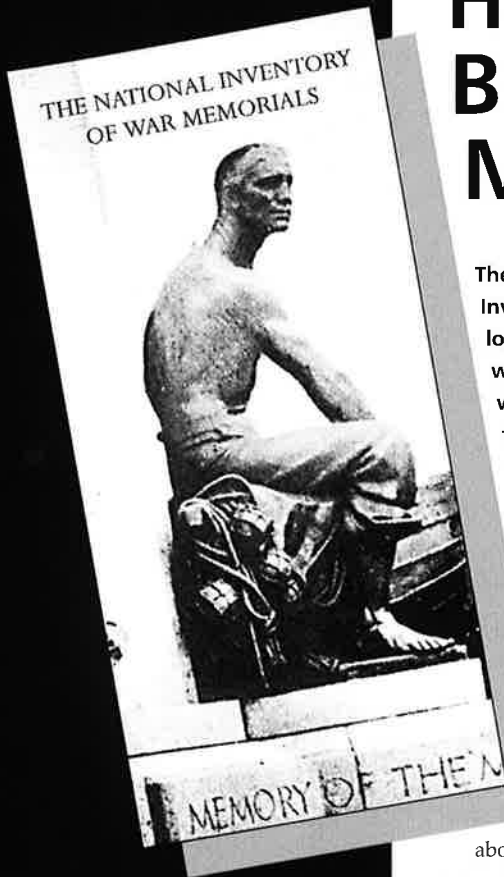
DEADLINE FOR SPRING 2000 ISSUE: 14 JANUARY 2000

Cover photo:
Gun Proving Warehouse, Commercial Road.
'It's a crazy building stuck with all the modern crap all around it.'
- Paul Clarke, taxi driver,
from the Isle of Dogs.

From The Ragged School Museum's exhibition 'Common Ground: Portraits of Tower Hamlets'.

SHCG News designed by Paul Cook
Tel: 01784 252698
Website address:
<http://members.tripod.co.uk/pcookdesign>
Email: pcookdesign@hotmail.com

Help record Britain's War Memorials



The organisers of the National Inventory of War Memorials are looking for volunteers to help with this major research project, which was initiated in 1989 by the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England.

It will eventually lead to the creation of a new archive holding information on the estimated 54,000 war memorials throughout the British Isles. In addition to files containing documentation about each memorial the archive comprises over 15,000 photographs and slides, a reference library and a large collection of ephemera.

It is estimated that there must be at least 60,000 memorials in the UK. So far, with the help of local volunteers, records have been compiled of about 30,000. The project aims to have completed records for all UK memorials and to have input the data onto a computer database by March 2001. In order to achieve this

aim, the organisers are looking for fieldworkers who can carry out a survey of their area using a standard recording form. They are also looking for volunteer regional co-ordinators in Wales, the Midlands, and the South East of England who will oversee the fieldwork in these areas.

Once the Inventory has been completed it will be a key research tool for those with an interest in local history, war in general and its commemoration from the nineteenth century to the present day. The archive will be open to the public and will assist the work of students and scholars, particularly in the fields of art and cultural history.

If you would like to be involved in this project contact:

Nick Hewitt,
Project Co-ordinator,
National Inventory of War Memorials,
Imperial War Museum,
Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ
Tel: 0171 416 5353
Fax: 0171 416 5379
Email: nhewitt@iwm.org.uk

SHCG NEWS will encourage and publish a wide range of views from those connected with history and museums. The NEWS aims to act as a channel for the exchange of information and opinions about current practice and theory in museums.

The views expressed in the newsletter are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

Articles for the NEWS should be between 500 to 2000 words.

Please submit a typed copy of your article along with a copy on disk, saved as a PC word file or rictext format, or you can send it as an email. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

Nicola is happy to answer all queries and provide a form sheet if required.

Send all contributions to:
Nicola Bleasby,
British Red Cross
Museum & Archives,
9 Grosvenor Crescent,
London, SW1X 7EJ
Tel: 0171 201 5444
Fax: 0171 235 0876
Email: nbleasby@redcross.org.uk

Young People in Museums

Nicola Tibbitts from the Museum Studies course at Leicester University is writing her MA dissertation on young people and museums. She is interested in any initiatives to involve 16-18 year olds in museums and galleries, through interactives, exhibitions, events, publications or targeted marketing campaigns.

If you have done any work with this age group, or know of anyone else who has, please contact:

Nicola Tibbitts,
50 Tudor Avenue,
Eastern Green,
Coventry CV5 7BD
Tel: 01203 465070

Friendly Societies

Curators interested in finding out more about their collections of nineteenth and twentieth century Friendly Society regalia, records and memorabilia may be interested in a new initiative by the Open University. The Friendly Societies Research Group aims to promote links between Societies, museums, archivists and scholars with the intention of creating new research opportunities and raising awareness of the importance of Society archives and artefacts in private collections and the public domain.

The *British Friendly Societies: Preserving their Heritage* meeting at the Open University in March was well attended and a conference is planned for 2000. Any individuals or institutions interested

in the development and history of Friendly Societies are invited to join the group which will act as a forum for the exchange of information about the history, records and activities of Friendly Societies.

Museum representatives are encouraging the adoption of professional standards of collections management and care within a corporate environment.

The possibilities for partnership are being promoted and a collaborative project is already underway between the National Museum of Labour History and the Manchester based affiliated order, The Rechabite Friendly Society Ltd.

Local organisation was central to the strength and support of Friendly Societies and their broad geographic appeal has resulted in the widespread distribution of archives and artefacts. The traditional association of Friendly Societies with symbolism and secret ritual practices may have discouraged curators from

approaching societies directly for identification of regalia. This new national network signifies a receptive and open response by friendly Societies to such requests. The Friendly Societies Research Group will enable museums to understand regalia in relation to rituals and its role in promoting membership unity and generating business loyalty.

**Annette French,
Temporary Curator,
Rechabite Collection,
National Museum of Labour History**

For more information about the Friendly Societies Research Group contact:
**Dan Weinbren,
Open University,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
Email: d.weinbren@open.ac.uk**

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

On The Ball Sporting Heritage - Interpretation & Issues Friday 12 November 1999 Twickenham Rugby Stadium

This one-day conference will look at current issues relating to the interpretation of sports heritage.

Included in the conference will be speakers from:

- The River and Rowing Museum, Henley
- The British Golf Museum, St. Andrews

- Hall of Fame, County Hall, South Bank, London
- The National Horseracing Museum, Newmarket

There will also be a talk on, and tour of, the Museum at Twickenham Rugby Stadium.

For further details and a booking form contact John Iddon at:
The Heritage Centre, St. Mary's Strawberry Hill, Twickenham TW1 4SX
Tel: 0181 240 4078 Fax: 0181 240 4255

Museums Association 105th Annual Conference

This year's Museums Association Conference in Edinburgh had a strong international and regional theme. With devolution and the impact of regional government beginning to have an effect, major plenary sessions examined these issues as well as the creation of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC).

SHCG hosted a session entitled 'Problematic Pasts and Presents: Can Museums Heal?' The theme was taken from this year's successful Annual Study Weekend in Belfast and speakers included Vivienne Pollock, Anthony Buckley and Rajwinder Pal.

A full report will appear in the next issue of SHCG News.

Print Gems

SAPPHIRE, the Scottish Archive of Print and Publishing History Records, is a project to develop a substantial oral history archive and database relating to the social, economic and cultural history of the Scottish print and publishing industry during the twentieth century. Based at Napier University, Edinburgh, the project has been developed in partnership with a range of educational, professional and non-commercial organisations concerned with preserving knowledge on the industry.

The aim of the project is to create an archive comprising three major areas of collection including: oral history recordings of personal reminiscences of former and current employees within the

print and publishing industry; photographic and videotaped records of current work practices and techniques and a collection of ephemeral material relating to the industry.

For more information about the project and details of how your organisation could become involved contact:

Dr Heather Holmes,
Post Doctoral Research Fellow,
SAPPHIRE,
Napier University,
Department of Print Media,
Publishing and Communication,
Craighouse Road,
Edinburgh EH10 5LG
Tel: 0131 455 6150
Fax: 0131 455 6193

Temporary Exhibitions

As part of their Temporary Exhibition Development Programme, East Riding of Yorkshire Museums are developing a database of providers of touring exhibitions.

If your museum has or is planning to develop a touring exhibition relating to any aspect of English Social History, contact:

Janet Tierney, Goole Museums Officer,
ERYC Offices, Church Street, Goole DN14 5BG

ASW 2000

The first Annual Study Weekend of the new Millennium will take place at the beginning of July in London. The theme will be 'Working Life' and the conference will focus on issues of collecting, recording and interpreting the experience of work with particular reference to new work practices.

The programme is yet to be finalised and the organisers would welcome any suggestions of speakers or practical workshop sessions that you would find useful.

Now is also the time to start thinking about whether you would like to present a members paper at the ASW. Papers are welcomed on any subject relating to Social History Curatorship and are an excellent opportunity to share your experiences with colleagues.

For ASW suggestions contact:

Zelda Baveystock,
Newcastle Discovery Museum,
Tel: 0191 232 6789

Or

Jayne Olphert,
Fermanagh County Museum,
Tel: 01365 325000

If you would like to give a paper contact:

Catherine Nisbet,
Wednesbury Art Gallery
& Museum,
Tel: 0121 556 0683

SHCG ASW 1999: Negotiating the Past- Can History Heal?

National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, Belfast and Cultra

Museums and Memorials

The prospect of a trip to Northern Ireland and a free place on this year's ASW raised many expectations, not least of which was the opportunity to indulge in some real Irish whisky and a genuine Ulster fry. The reality lived up to all anticipation. In answer to the main question of the ASW, 'Can History Heal?', I had expected to find that it could, and that it was the responsibility of museums to utilise this restorative potential. On this point, I left with a slightly different outlook.

Meg Ashworth

Curatorial Assistant (Social History),
Buckinghamshire County Museum

The ameliorative powers of history were problematised most powerfully by speakers from outside the museum profession. They spoke of people's need for memorials around which they can unburden their grief and commemorate a common past. Tony Walters of Reading University was the first to introduce the idea of this need for a 'last chapter'. The story of an individual, or a society, needs to be complete before people are able to mourn. This leaves us with the complex problem of negotiating a conclusion which is satisfactory to all parties involved in the process. How can history heal when it is a highly contested terrain?

Yasmin Sooka of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave a moving account of how the people of South Africa had endeavoured to come to terms with their past. The emphasis began with truth telling, but this revealed the huge range of truths to account for. The Commission gathered not only the objective information necessary to make up a factual truth, but also the contextual, personal, social and restorative truths which exist side by side. The problem which remains is finding the means of balancing so many competing realities and the continued non-agreement of the 'mourners', with the overriding desire to find a fitting settlement of the recent past.

This theme was continued by Kenneth Bloomfield of the Northern Ireland

Victims' Commission. Again, the need for a memorial was thrown into sharp relief by the knowledge that it must provide for people who have been left distressed and damaged by the past which must be memorialised. In order to be successful, a memorial must be inclusive and comprehensive. There is a need to comprise all versions of the past, whether mythic or academic, in order to give all members of the community, however divided, the capacity to locate themselves in an officially recognised history. So how can museums contribute, if at all, to the construction of a shared and consensual narrative?

It seems to me that there is a genuine gulf between the need for a memorial and what can realistically be achieved by museums. This was brought home to me by the efforts of the Haus der Geschichte in Germany, described by Harold Biermann. The discrepancy between the stated aim of creating a common history of the unified nation, and the actual attempts to realise this is a dangerous one. The new outpost in former East German Leipzig concentrates solely on the history of resistance under the old regime and there is a denial of the 'ostalgia' experienced by members of the former communist society. The museum represents an exclusive version of the past and demonstrates the difficulties faced by all museums when they undertake the ideal of universal provision. Incomplete history is as likely to lead to division as it is to understanding.

Museums, therefore, may not be the most appropriate agents of community memorialisation. If, like the Haus der Geschichte, they aim for the required comprehensiveness, they will necessarily fall short of the ideal. This does not mean, however, that they have no role to play in the negotiation of a shared past.

Initiatives in Northern Ireland illustrate the ways in which museums can participate. The affirmative approach of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum emphasises the right of all sections of the community to be represented and celebrates that diversity. The Tower Museum takes a more confrontational approach, which explicitly shows a conflictual past and requires the visitor to engage with that divided history.

"It seems to me that there is a genuine gulf between the need for a memorial and what can realistically be achieved by museums."

In bringing difference into the museum space, the validity of divergent truths is asserted, and public debate of emotional issues is sanctioned.

My expectation that history in museums can heal has therefore changed. I am no longer sure that museums can fulfill the role of memorials as described by Yasmin Sooka and Kenneth Bloomfield.

I do think, however, that they can help people to write their 'last chapter' by breaking the silences of the past and allowing people a context in which they can explore the histories of their community. In doing so, they may well be able to contribute to an atmosphere in which a more complete and final memorial is possible.

So, can museums heal or not?

One of the closing speakers suggested that in fact answering either "yes" or "no" to the question has profoundly disturbing implications. If museums do heal, then how long can it be before we are taken over by social services? But, if museums cannot heal, what possible purpose can they serve? Attempting to discuss the healing possibilities of museums in societies in conflict led to an intense re-considering of a number of fundamental questions, a beneficial exercise even if you are not a social history curator in Northern Ireland. Many of these debates centred on, or were grounded in four key processes...

Jane Sarre

Assistant Museums Adviser,
Kent County Council,
Education & Libraries

01 PROCESSES OF HISTORY

During the weekend, the one guaranteed answer to any question was the need for 'good history'. However, given the central question, it was fitting that this was paralleled by the need to reconsider the more personal, psychological processes of life experience and biographical narrative. The dichotomies between myth / history, propaganda / truth were challenged, highlighting the need for historical writing that more closely reflected people's experiences of social conflicts.

Yasmin Sooka clearly demonstrated this when she described the way in which her colleagues at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had come to understand 'Truth' as a concept with many faces:

- **Factual**, or evidential truth
- **Systemic**, understanding of the way in which a system works, and the rules or patterns it follows

- **Narrative**, or individual truth based on personal experience
- **Dialogic**, or social, the understanding which a community comes to through public discussion

Another speaker later suggested that 'Truth' could also be **Artistic** truth, which may be bigger than the supporting evidence, but is not fictitious.

Drawing on this it was suggested writing the history of a conflicted past can help to write an integrated future by drawing these different narratives together. However, in order to do this, people have to be able to take on new roles. They have to be able to engage in process of history without signing out of their old group identities, so, their new positions must be set up as extensions of the old, rather than in opposition to them.

03 PROCESSES OF HEALING

Healing could be understood in a 'medical' model as the mending of that which had been broken: the act of returning something to its original state. This was challenged on two counts - firstly with regard to the motivations of museums: is this social fixing something that museums can, or should, do? Secondly, many of the speakers used a more 'psychological' model, focusing on the ways in which people incorporate painful events or experiences into their lives. Here, healing is not a return but an onwards journey, a project which museums, with their longstanding educational goals, ought to find easier to assimilate.

However, this model also carries with it an understanding that the healing process is firmly rooted in the individual and their web of social relationships. It is not something that museums (or social services) can do to a traumatised person or community. Rather those individuals may heal themselves, in a process which may be facilitated and supported by outside agencies. Case studies showed quite clearly that there is a role for museums as a 'safe space' where issues of the past and identity can be explored, and the process of healing can be supported.

02 PROCESSES OF CONFLICT

As a keynote speaker, Michael Hoolihan from the Ulster Museum, pointed out social conflict is probably as old as human society, and indeed, the modern Nation state has its origins in conflict management structures. Conflict was described as an element which is inside all human animals, but which only becomes evident when emotion and instinct

displace rationality. In order to arrive at historical understanding, conflict situations therefore need to be analysed in terms of these 'sub-rational' forces. Only by addressing conflict on this level will we ever be able to broach what speaker Harald Bierman described as "the wall in German's heads".

04 PROCESSES OF MUSEUM CURATION

The discussions about history, conflict and healing all showed that there was room for museums to make a meaningful contribution. However, they also clearly showed the wisdom of treading carefully, and making carefully considered actions.

Speakers showed that curating which addresses conflict situations, has an audience, public respect, and value. Addressing these types of events and issues can also create a powerful educative experience for all concerned. This enlightenment can happen unexpectedly, but the intellectual shift it creates is of enormous value in a society suffering from fixed and oppositional identities. The implication is therefore that we should be aiming to fire the process of imagination. Not the imaginary, the false or made up, but the ability to image - to see beyond personal experience.

Perhaps then, the central message of the weekend is the need to consider the impact of human emotions. Very few museums address emotionality, but contemporary conflicts are so closely tied up with the identities and emotional states that if this aspect of recent history is not addressed,

validity may be lost. This arises partly because, for the local population, the act of recording is one of commemoration and memorialising, rather than one of writing academic history. Professionals therefore need to take up additional tools and techniques to address these particular sensitivities. They must respect people's emotional needs to hear the truth, but to hear a truth that makes sense in their experience, to see remorse, to forgive, to bury the dead, to grieve and then finally to find ways of continuing to live, and carry their memories lightly.

In addition to the impact emotions can have on the collecting and writing of social/oral histories, the matter of interpretation also needs to be carefully considered. For even the most dispassionate historical text can provoke powerful responses from audience members. Museums can provoke passionate responses by displaying the recent past, and therefore need to consider whether they are equipped to deal with those responses, and whether 'neutral space' is always an appropriate environment for events that are anything but neutral.

In the end, these complex debates contain some very simple lessons, which could be beneficially applied almost anywhere:

Interdisciplinary

Life experience is interdisciplinary. The Troubles are not a separate realm of experience, their influence runs through all aspects of life for all people, and they only really make sense presented in this way.

Provoking thought

A driving force behind museum practice is the wish to educate: to provoke thought, discussion, understanding, compassion and potentially action.

Listening

Contemporary social history is a form of social interaction. It is important to be sensitive to all participants, which requires real listening. Being heard is in itself healing, it gives space for people to construct narrative of their experiences, share their history, and be respected.

Thoughtfulness

Rather than indulging in labels, thoughtfulness is needed so that we do not oversimplify and stereotype the multitude of different and shifting positions in any society, or judge others without allowing them to speak for themselves.

Timeliness

Any action should be considered and timely. It is important to consider the impact of exhibiting on a situation - to be aware of the possibility of falsely 'fixing' a constantly shifting situation. Is exhibiting during a conflict the making of a partisan contribution, or is silence more partisan? Ultimately, timeliness means listening to people who are ready to speak, and respecting what the audience are ready to see: taking small steps so that everyone can travel on together.

**And finally...
Integration**

Museums are not only processes, they are also institutions. If an event is interdisciplinary in life, it remains so even after entering the museum - they should not be made the province of certain staff, or be dependent on particular funding programmes, but should underpin the philosophy of the institution as a whole from the governing body to the cleaner.

A Personal Perspective

Throughout the weekend I found myself explaining over and over again to other delegates what a curator from the Victoria & Albert Museum was doing at the SHCG ASW.

Helen Wilkinson

Curatorial Assistant,
Records and Collection Services,
Victoria & Albert Museum

My presence was perhaps particularly surprising because the theme of the conference wasn't, say, contemporary collecting policies or the use of oral history but a very specific and challenging topic: the role of the museum in societies or communities which have traumatic pasts. After all, museums of the decorative arts do not have to address war and conflict; their displays do not have the potential to outrage and alienate communities and individuals. But perhaps they do? Only a small elite may be moved to anger by a wrong attribution of a painting or vase but what design museums say can matter to people and communities very much indeed.

Museums of design often display objects made for the very wealthy by exploited, poorly paid workers without even acknowledging that fact, let alone exploring the values of societies in which such objects are made. We may also display artefacts from other cultures in ways which are deeply offensive, perhaps because we ignore a religious significance and place them in an inappropriate context, or because we do not acknowledge the implications of a colonial past which brought those objects into British museums.

Curators of design are beginning to take these ideas on board. At the V&A, Susan Stronge, curator of the Art of the Sikh Kingdoms exhibition, worked with several Sikh groups to establish what objects could appropriately be shown in a secular space. The team working on the V&A's new British Galleries are explicitly addressing issues about production and exchange in new ways: for example, Chinese objects in a seventeenth century setting will be discussed in the light of the history of the import of luxury goods and its implications. The theme of this year's ASW really goes to the heart of what we do as museum curators. Many of us were

drawn to work in a museum because we believed that museums could be a force for good in society. We do not all look after collections which are potentially politically inflammatory, but we all tell human histories and need to be aware of the power of those histories in contemporary society.

Kenneth Bloomfield, the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner and Yasmin Sooka of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa both spoke very movingly about their experiences of listening to victims of conflict. They have worked in very different situations but what emerged from both their papers was how important it can be to those who have suffered to have the story of their past told. Tony Walker from the University of Reading, a sociologist who specialises in the sociology of death, talked about how grieving individuals need to talk through the life of the one who has died and "talk" them into shape in their minds. The suggestion was that history is analogous to this. But can history heal?

Susie Fisher led a discussion session based around her findings from focus group discussions in three cities. She had identified feelings of loss and anxiety in local communities which the museums concerned hoped to address in their displays. Delegates were highly sceptical about the notion of a museum visit being a healing experience for individuals. People were nervous about the idea of deliberately setting out to offer therapeutic experience. One delegate said "I am not a therapist: I just want to tell good history, and if that works for people, then that's all well and good." I think what emerged from the rest of the weekend was that good history does "work" for people and communities. All of us, whether we collect the ephemera of the Troubles or eighteenth-century silks, have a duty to try and tell it.



The Museum on the Move bus

Museum on the Move

The idea of a mobile museum is not new. Many museums have had minibuses with travelling exhibitions and some authorities, such as Kirkcaldy and Ulster, have invested in converted buses to transport educational resources to schools. The Museum on the Move, however, has taken the concept to a different level.

**Claudia Hart,
Community Heritage Access Officer,
Hereford Museum and Art Gallery**

In the mid 1990s, Shropshire Museum Service, headed by Nigel Nixon, saw that as a rural county the population was spread quite thinly, and access to museums tended to be in the few densely populated areas. Rural isolation and issues of inadequate public transport all contributed to the lack of visitors to the county's museums. Therefore, the idea of taking the 'mountains to Mohammed' - physically taking a self-contained museum in a vehicle out to communities - would fulfil the aims of both local and

national government, as well as every museum's wish to extend access for all.

It was intended that the Museum should be available in a wide range of venues, such as schools, community groups, village centres, youth clubs and hospitals. It should also be multi-functional and flexible enough to be used by other departments, such as Records and Research, for their own displays. According to Nigel Nixon, "the vehicle would act as a museum on wheels taking samples of the county's extensive collections out into the community".

An opportunity arose to put this idea into practice when, in 1996, the Sir Jules Thorn Charitable Trust invited applications from museums with innovative educational projects. An application was submitted that addressed the type of vehicle envisaged for the scheme, how the project was to be managed, the target audiences and the long-term viability of the project through local authority funding. On the 29th April 1997, Nigel



Sarah Griffiths, Project Officer helps pupils from Ivington Primary School to explore the Museum on the Move

Nixon received a letter from the Trust confirming that they had awarded Museum on the Move funding.

Nigel then invited the then Hereford & Worcester Museum service to become involved in the project, especially as they had considered a similar idea themselves. Involving what then became two other counties enabled the project to pool resources, experience and collections. The award of £138,000 covered development, administration costs, fitting out and equipping the vehicle. Running costs were to be met from each county.

In May 1988, a steering committee made up of representatives of each county appointed Sarah Griffiths as a part-time project officer to co-ordinate the project across the three counties. Her first task was to carry out research on other mobile

museums. This resulted in the conclusion that a trailer display was not suitable for our needs and it was agreed that a vehicle should be chosen that could be driven by persons holding a standard driving licence. Shropshire Council's Transport Management Organisation (TMO) became involved from an early stage and advised on production, maintenance and driver training.

Regular committee meetings were held to discuss such subjects as the results of market research into potential users, and there was a heated debate on the colour and icons of the vehicle! Various members of the group were allocated tasks such as getting costings for IT equipment and Worcestershire, who had been given the task of co-ordinating the first exhibition, carried out a break down of the exhibition themes.

An exhibition team was formed from this committee, with guest speakers in the form of History Advisers, able to add valuable comments in the early stages. The subject decided upon was Food and Drink through history, 'Munch', this was general enough to encompass the collections of all three Counties and popular enough to have wide appeal. It was agreed that the text had to be researched and written as a priority, and as a basis for deciding what interactives, IT and objects were to be used in the exhibition.

I entered the group fairly late in the life of the project, but while there was still much work to be done. Herefordshire Heritage Services managed to find the funding for a post that would include responsibility for the Museum on the Move; I applied and got the job. The interview tasks consisted of making a plinth from pieces of MDF, using a Black and Decker Workmate and some basic tools, and driving a 7.5 tonne vehicle twice around Leominster. After which, the interview itself was relatively painless!

As my post was the only one of the group, other than the project officer, to be dedicated to the Museum on the Move project, I became involved in many aspects of it, such as the exhibition, marketing the bus in Herefordshire, security, a lottery bid for the Access Fund and being a sounding board for the much harassed project officer. I even joined the mobile library service for a day to get an idea of the working conditions of a travelling community facility. The most important advice they gave me was to be sure of your loo stops and where you could be guaranteed of a good cup of coffee!

The contract for the body building was awarded to Keillors of Dundee and John Kirk Designs of Loughborough were appointed to design and deliver the

"..after three years of planning, we could finally see the project taking physical shape."

internal fittings. We tried to anticipate a million and one uses for the Museum on the Move during its ten year life span and these requirements were included in the briefs given to both Keillors and JK Designs.

Finally in January 1999, Sarah Griffiths and I travelled to Dundee with a mission to inspect the work carried out by Keillors and to talk to Dave Fisher of the TMO and Darren Farman of JK Designs about what we required of the bus and its fittings. The visit was instructive because, after three years of planning, we could finally see the project taking physical shape. We could see how something on paper was going to work in practice and with input from Dave and Darren, we discussed the best solutions for achieving our aims.

With the design of the bus taking shape, attention was diverted to the exhibition team who were to finish the text panels, decide what objects and interactives were to be included, construct the loans boxes and write the teacher's packs. The next few months were a time of feverish activity, many phone calls, more meetings and discussions about the arrangements for each county's launch.

JK Designs worked like slaves to finish the fittings in two weeks instead of the agreed six weeks due to Keillors not having met their deadline and then the race was on to fit the exhibition in less than a week. Alyson Lloyd, of Worcestershire County Museum, worked tirelessly to translate her ideas for the bus into reality, with the result that we managed to fit a large part of the exhibition, adopt smiling faces and launch Museum on the Move in three different counties in one week.

Since then, Museum on the Move has been well received by pilot schools in Herefordshire and Worcestershire and

we are continuing to pilot and evaluate the project with schools and non-school venues. Two members of the exhibition team, Alyson Lloyd, and myself are taking part in the WMRMC Evaluation Project, using the Museum on the Move as our study. This evaluation will allow us to adjust labelling and displays in this early phase, and give us valuable feedback for planning the next exhibition.

The whole project has worked, and will continue to work only with the full co-operation of all members of the Museum on the Move committee. It has been a steep learning curve for all concerned, not least in working together in this rather amorphous 'team,' which has three different approaches to museum provision. There have been many teething problems which I won't go into here, but the back up structure is such that there are many people to call upon in the event of problems. We have achieved the initial goal and hope now to provide the kind of flexible service to the visiting and non-visiting public, which will help them to view museums as not only theirs, but as accessible and exciting.

If you would like more information about the project, or would like to view the bus whilst it is in either of the three counties, please contact:

Herefordshire:

Claudia Hart,
Community Heritage Access Officer,
Tel: 01432 260692

Shropshire:

Sarah Griffiths, Project Officer,
Tel: 01694 781306

Worcestershire:

Robin Hill, Tel: 01299 250416

An AMAzing Experience!

A new route to Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) was launched in 1996, the old practical examination being replaced with an assessment of skills and experience developed over a minimum of two years of Continual Professional Development (CPD). Lucy Allchurch is one of the first to become an AMA under the new scheme.

**Lucy Allchurch,
Curator of Exhibitions,
Jersey Museums Service**

For further details about the AMA scheme, contact:
**Heather Kelly, AMA Officer,
Museums Association,
42 Clerkenwell Close,
London EC1R 0PA
Tel: 0171 608 2933**

One of the central aims of the new AMA is to accommodate the diverse range of people working in the museum profession - whether they be curators, conservators, registrars, educators or managers. There are therefore three alternative routes to undertaking the AMA which recognise the different qualifications, skills and experience of people working in museums.

Once accepted as an aspirant AMA, my first task was to find a suitable mentor to guide me through the two year CPD process. Faced with a directory of mentors, the majority of whose names were unfamiliar, it was a somewhat daunting task. With advice from my director, however, I approached Richard Harrison (a museum consultant and Chair of the Society for the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage) who agreed to act as my mentor. We met early on in the process to discuss my plans for the next two years, the skills and experience which I wanted to develop and the direction in which I wanted to take my work. These discussions helped me to formulate my CPD Plan and we met again to review progress a couple of times a year.

The AMA scheme requires a minimum of seventy hours of CPD over two years, and although this at first seemed a lot of hours, in reality my CPD Log filled quickly. One of the best things about CPD is that it is not just about attending courses and seminars, which can be difficult when training budgets are always so tight. I found that CPD became a new way of thinking and that the workplace offered continual challenges and opportunities to gain experience that

could be incorporated into my CPD Log. Some of the skills I gained were rather unusual. For example, while working on a project to develop a Maritime Museum I decided to do a sailing course so that I would have a more practical knowledge of boats, sails, winds and tides. This meant that I felt more comfortable with the subject and increased my confidence in dealing with local seamen and maritime experts involved with the project.

At the end of two years, CPD Log in hand, I faced the final challenge of the Professional Review. This takes the form of an interview by two museum professionals and the AMA Officer lasting about forty minutes. It is formally structured with a discussion of your continual professional development, questions about some of the current issues affecting museums and a demonstration of your understanding of the Museum Association's Codes of Ethics, followed by a discussion of your future career plans. The structured nature of the Review means that you can go in well prepared with practical examples of your knowledge and understanding, but the questioning was surprisingly rigorous and I was glad when my forty minutes were up!

Despite having successfully gained my AMA, continual professional development does not end here. As a new style AMA, I have committed myself to CPD and I have also been invited by the Museums Association to join a pilot scheme looking at extending CPD to all existing AMAs and FMAs. The pilot will run for nine months and then it looks likely that CPD will become a part of all our professional lives.



Students from Poetry in Wood, a local training course for people with learning difficulties, visiting 'Common Ground: Portraits of Tower Hamlets' at the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel, in June 1999. Poetry in Wood made the frames for the exhibition

Involving and Reaching Communities

'Common Ground: Portraits of Tower Hamlets' at the Ragged School Museum, London

This article is about a small project undertaken by a small museum in an attempt to work in partnership with and effectively reach its local community. Based on the simplest of ideas and with only a modest budget, it is presented as an example of what anyone can do with no imagination and relatively few resources.

**Richard Dunn, Curator,
Ragged School Museum**

The Ragged School Museum is a small independent museum in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and aims to be the community museum for that borough. In recent years museum staff have been trying to develop projects which both involve and are accessible to all members of a highly

diverse inner-city community. The underlying ethos of these projects has been one of general inclusion rather than of specific targeting of single groups.

The idea behind *Common Ground* was simple and we are not claiming it was original. In the words of Rehan Jamil, the photographer with whom we worked, "the main idea was to show what a young Asian man and an old white woman have in common. They could be standing at a bus stop and not talking to each other, but they share the same things - we all do." In thinking about what makes a community, one of the things that ties it together, we believed, is the landscape its members share. We all use, go into, or pass by the buildings and spaces that make up our local area, although as individuals our feelings about each place may vary.



Shabina Ghoni from Stepney: 'I like swimming 'cos it's my best sport.' Swimming Pool, St. Paul's Way School

In *Common Ground* we wanted to capture both the shared experience of the physical make-up of the borough and the uniqueness of each individual's feelings.

The project was funded through a Peabody Trust 'Leaders for London' Millennium Award of £3,500 to Rehan, a photojournalism student at Tower Hamlets College. The awards aim to encourage young people in inner-London boroughs to carry out projects of benefit to themselves and to their local community and this project was seen as a perfect example of what they wanted to fund.

The main work took place during the summer of 1998. Travelling around Tower Hamlets, the photographer and I asked people to tell us about places that have a special meaning for them. Their thoughts and feelings were recorded and Rehan took photographic portraits of each at their chosen location. In the end, we talked to nearly thirty people at different locations, of whom twenty were chosen for the final exhibition of photographs and accompanying quotes.

The people interviewed for the project came from a wide variety of backgrounds. We wanted as far as

possible to represent the borough's population fairly, in order to show that this was a theme common to everyone. In identifying potential volunteers we were able to draw on a number of contacts. The museum could draw on its formal links with other community organisations. Nevertheless, personal contacts both of the museum staff and of the photographer proved even more successful in giving us a good sample of people to choose from. Indeed, this is one lesson that I am slowly learning about working as a community curator - that links within the community often rely on specific individuals and can be as strong or as weak as that implies.

In developing the project we were conscious that we not only wanted to represent our local community fairly, but also wished the final exhibition to be viewed by as many people from that community as possible. Many Tower Hamlets residents speak English as an additional language and the main mother tongue, other than English, is Bengali (23% of the Borough is of Bangladeshi origin). We therefore decided to have all exhibition text translated into Bengali, with equal text weighting for both versions.

The opening and first showing of the exhibition was at the museum, although we were already aware that this might not be enough on its own. Although the museum is well used by some of our local community and is free to visit, we know that there are many who still do not come into the building and feedback from a survey carried out in 1998 showed us that people were not entirely sure of what exactly the museum was and faced many barriers excluding them from coming in. To combat this social exclusion, therefore, we tried to develop ways in which local people could have access to the exhibition by seeing it in a range of alternative contexts.

The first idea came from the photographer, who suggested we approach Stagecoach East London to ask if they would consider showing parts of the exhibition on local buses. They were more than happy to help in this way and we produced, in-house, 80 panels (including translated text) for different bus routes, i.e. 4 additional versions of the exhibition. This coincided with the exhibition and so not only gave people direct access to the exhibition but served as a way of attracting to the museum those who might want to see more of it.

The second approach was to produce a low-cost touring exhibition. Since March 1999 this has been shown at different venues in Tower Hamlets in an attempt to get it seen by as wide a variety of people in as many different types of social space as possible. The tour began at the Asda Superstore on the Isle of Dogs, the feedback from which was very positive, and has gone on to the Royal London Hospital, community centres, libraries and the Town Hall. Because this version is on its own free-standing display boards and we are able to transport and show it without charge, it has been easy to find venues other than traditional exhibition spaces who are willing to show it and we are planning dates within the borough into the year 2000. We have also now put an electronic version of the exhibition on our website (www.ics-london.co.uk/rsm).

So, what have been the benefits? For the Museum the project has been a great success. It has allowed us to move to a point where we feel able to produce our own exhibitions and can make them accessible to our local community through touring. Secondly, through working on the project and making deliberate efforts to talk to different groups and individuals in the local community, we have begun to make links which will serve us in the future, in

developing both exhibitions and the museum's services as a whole. Thirdly, the working relationship with Rehan has been incredibly positive. As a 20 year-old from the British Asian community, born and bred in the local area, he has given us an alternative view of the borough which has enriched our work.

“...this is one lesson that I am slowly learning... that links within the community often rely on specific individuals...”

Conversely, there have been benefits for Rehan. His career has progressed since the project, with work coming as a direct result of word-of-mouth recommendations from people who had seen or heard about it. Indeed, the small book we produced from the project now often serves as his portfolio. All in all, then, I would consider the project an enormous success, both in terms of the range of outputs we achieved on a modest budget and in the relationships we have begun to form within the community. If there is one lesson that I think others can draw, it is that anyone can undertake projects which involve and relate to their communities - lack of imagination and limited financial resources should not be seen as obstacles. All it requires is time and commitment.

SHCG COMMITTEE 1999-2000

CHAIR

Janet Dugdale,
Museum of Liverpool Life,
Pier Head,
Liverpool L3 1PZ
Tel: 0151 478 4061/4063

SECRETARY

Lucy Allchurch,
Jersey Museums Service,
The Weighbridge,
St. Helier,
Jersey, C.I.
JE2 3NF
Tel: 01534 633323

TREASURER

Robert Rose,
Braintree District Museum,
The Town Hall Centre,
Market Square,
Braintree,
Essex CM7 6YG
Tel: 01376 325266

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Victoria Emmanuel,
Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery,
Chamberlain Square,
Birmingham B3 3DH
Tel: 0121 303 1672

NEWS EDITOR

Nicola Bleasby,
The British Red Cross
Museum & Archives,
9 Grosvenor Crescent,
London SW1X 7EJ
Tel: 0171 201 5444

JOURNAL EDITOR

Nigel Wright,
Astley Hall Museum & Art Gallery,
Astley Hall,
Chorley,
Lancashire PR7 1NP
Tel: 01257 515555

SEMINAR ORGANISERS

Catherine Nisbet Tel: 0121 556 0683
Wednesbury Art Gallery & Museum

Stephen Lowy Tel: 0121 242 0508

ORDINARY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Zelda Baveystock Tel: 0191 232 6789
Newcastle Discovery Museum

Tony Buckley Tel: 01232 428428
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Eleanor Moore Tel: 0161 832 2244
Museum of Science & Industry,
Manchester

Jayne Olphert Tel: 01365 325000
Fermanagh County Museum

Helen Sykes Tel: 0121 303 2875
Discovery Centre, Birmingham